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AUTHOR Stokes, Louise D.
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ABSTRACT

Basic to successful teaching of standard English to speakers of Black English is an assessment of teacher and student attitudes toward each language and their perceptions of one another's attitudes toward each language. Regardless of how innovative or unique methods of teaching language and communication promise to be or how instructive and enlightening curriculum workshops or institutes may be, unless teachers soften negative attitudes toward dialect and dialect speakers, it is doubtful that any meaningful progress toward facilitating language teaching, learning, and use can be successfully effected. Teachers need to be aware that many linguists consider Black English to be a different, highly structured, and fully developed linguistic system with an internal consistency and regularity in its phonological, grammatical, and semantic components. While many students want to learn standard English for academic and professional reasons, many consider their black dialect valuable for their personal and group communicative, expressive, and identity needs. (MKM)

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Louise D. Stokes - Norfolk State College

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# What is Really Basic About Dialect and Teaching? Attitudes Are.

As a reflection of the 4C's concern for the dialectal problems confronting the hordes of students who were entering college classrooms with dialects that were significantly different from that of the academic environment, that august body, in April 1974, adopted as official policy a resolution which reads in part:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. . . We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

The significant implication of this resolution is that it apparently recognizes and strongly suggests that the teachers' starting point for dealing with the dialect problems of their students lies in the area of attitudes toward language, attitudes of both teachers and students as well as of society in general. And though this resolution reflects the thinking of the 4C's as a national body representing thousands of college and university English teachers, I am firmly of the opinion that a vast majority of teachers comprising the body are still persuaded by the Good English/Bad English syndrome, which promulgates the superiority of the standard dialect as the only correct and acceptable variety of English and, through the practice of exclusion, negation, and denigration, the inferiority of the nonstandard dialect as a sloppy, incorrect or corrupt form of English. Even in the light of recent linguistic research by such scholars as William Labov, Bill Stewart, Joan Baratz, Ralph Fasold, Kenneth Johnson, and Roger Shuy, to name a few, English teachers continue to hold fast to the prescrip-

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tive approach, proclaiming the "correctness" of Standard English (SE) and the "wrongness" of Black Nonstandard English (BNE) that their students bring to the classroom.

My purpose today, however, is not to castigate fellow teachers, nor to attempt to convert any one from one linguistic persuasion to another. Rather, I intend to suggest that English teachers, in their quest for solutions to the difficulty of teaching students with dialect interference problems, would do well to begin with an examination of both their own attitudes and the students' attitudes toward the students' language as well as the students' perceptions of their teachers' perceptions of that language. Regardless of how innovative or unique methods of teaching language and communication promise to be, or how instructive and enlightening curriculum workshops or institutes may be, or even how stimulating and provocative conferences such as this one are, unless teachers soften negative attitudes toward dialect and dialect speakers, it is doubtful that any meaningful progress toward facilitating language teaching, learning, and use can be successfully effected. This assessment and an understanding of the implications of that assessment, then, are what I consider to be basic about dialect and teaching.

Unfortunately, far too many English teachers either are not aware of, or do not agree with, much of the current research regarding the language of dialect speakers - in this particular case, black dialect speakers. Linguists such as Labov, Baratz, and Stewart, whose studies challenge the well-known verbal deficiency and deprivation theories of Deutsch, Jensen, Bereiter and Engelmann, embrace the view that the language of black dialect speakers is a different - not inferior - but highly structured and fully developed linguistic system with an internal consistency and regularity in its phonological, grammatical and semantic components.

This linguistic system which has discernible differences, especially in grammatical structure, from the standard variant that the BNE speaker encounters in school poses serious interference problems in his communication and writing success. Yet this language which fails to meet the demands of his school community adequately serves the communicative and expressive functions necessary for effective operation and interaction within the confines of his family and peer group. For all its viability and functionality proclaimed by recent sociolinguistic research, the reality persists, nonetheless, that the educational community does not recognize nor accept the version of English spoken by many black students as a legitimate and formally structured dialect in its own right.

Those teachers who accept these linguistic understandings are not likely to alienate their students by rejecting their language, which is an integral part of their identity and self-image, on the grounds that it is wrong, bad, or otherwise inferior to their own. Instead, teachers will accept the students' linguistic ability for what it is and use it as a basis for increasing the language options that are available to them, thereby stimulating their linguistic competence to more productive linguistic performance capability.

Students of language and culture generally agree that in the area of social dialects where the language is so closely interwoven with the cultural values and identity of the people, teacher attitudes are believed to be particularly significant. Kenneth Johnson, (1969) for one, observes that the greatest problem in teaching SE to dialect speakers "involves the attitudes of teachers toward the dialect." (p. 78) Noting that the vast majority of teachers, especially English teachers, have traditionally looked upon the black dialect as "bad, sloppy speech," he reasons that "this kind of attitude . . . can only alienate . . . black children from the instructional program," making them

"not likely to accept the language (SE) /which/ teachers attempt to teach." (p. 79) Courtney Cazden (1973) agrees that though "there is no empirical evidence that dialect differences per se have any direct adverse effect on a child's educability . . . there is empirical evidence of an indirect adverse effect-the effect of a child's speech on his teacher's attitudes toward him, and thereby on the learning envirnoment that she creates." (p. 140) Wallace Lambert (1960) and his colleagues at McGill University and Frederick Williams (1970b) have collected data that revealed teachers' negative evaluations of the speech of minority and lower-class groups. Lambert's studies showed that the sterotypes associated with the minority group affected the teacher's speech evaluations of the group. As in Lambert's case, Williams found that from tape-recorded samples of black and white middle-and lower-class students, teachers tend to make their evaluations along two broad dimensions, "confidence-eagerness" and "ethnicity-nonstandardness," although they claimed that they had considered other details. Speech samples rated as suggestive of non-confidence (e.g., samples revealing frequency of hesitation) and phonological nonstandardness were more often assigned by teachers to lower-class black speakers who were also given more negative ratings than the speakers who were rated as confident and standard speakers. From his studies, Williams suggests that "the teacher bases much of her instructional behavior toward a child upon this kind of sterotype." (p. 389)

The research cited above focused on teacher attitudes toward spoken language of ethnic and social class groups using recorded speech samples; very little, however, has been done on teacher attitudes toward the suitability of black dialect for academic purposes. These areas are of significance to us as English teachers because in academic courses where SE is the only acceptable variety, teachers' attitudes can determine approach and methodology,

but more importantly, can determine the academic fate of many students who experience dialect interference in both speaking and writing.

In Orlando Taylor's (1973) survey of 422 teachers chosen from nine federal census districts across the U. S., teachers' attitudes toward non-standard and black dialect ranged from positive to neutral. The first category - the structural and inherent usefulness of nonstandard and black dialect - received the most negative response, prompting Taylor to conclude that apparently "linguistic structure is the topic that teachers find most objectionable about nonstandard dialects." (p. 199) For the other categories, Taylor found more positive responses, although there was a "substantial core of negative attitudes." (p. 197) Surprisingly, the most positive results were reflected in category four--consequences of dialect use in the classroom--a finding which appears at variance with the prevailing notion that teachers, for the most part, are unfavorably disposed toward language variations. This finding is a hopeful sign, despite admonitions from Cazden, Williams (1972) and Taylor himself, among others, that a major problem in analyzing attitude responses is the difficulty of distinguishing attitudes from actual practice.

Taylor's study is representative of the meager research substantiating the prevalence of negativism that teachers exhibit toward grammatical deviations and particularly their sensitivity to structural differences between the standard and nonstandard dialect, i.e., the black dialect. This negativism and sensitivity toward structural aspects of language are readily manifested in the inordinate time and energy English teachers spend in lecturing on "good, correct, English," and "correcting errors," sometimes at the expense of attending to what the student has to say and the rhetorical style he employs to say it. At this point, I am not suggesting that there should be a battle royal over content versus grammar and usage, nor that one is more important than the other. Neither am I contending that teachers should not encourage

their students to be what one scholar calls "competent copyreaders," who carefully attend to language appropriateness, stylistic conventions and the writing amenities. The point to be made here is that, in general, English teachers, obsessed with "correctness mania" of structural forms as a result of their aversion to the students' deviant forms, frequently bypass opportunities to encourage students' expression of their ideas and experiences in a personally meaningful way. For many teachers, the medium, not the message, assumes a greater importance.

The danger of negative teacher attitudes is that they often inform teachers' expectations of student performance. According to Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968a, 1968b), teachers' attitudes and expectations can and often do affect student performance. Although this team's research has been criticized in some quarters for defects in design and method and inconsistency in their findings, there is some validity in their study. In a communication from Professor Robert Parker of Rutgers University, I have been told of a book recently published in England entitled Classrooms Observed by Roy Nash which, Dr. Parker claims, "documents tellingly the effects of teacher expectations on student performance." That teachers possess negative attitudes toward dialect speakers can be documented and accepted even by the skeptics among us; the postulation that these attitudes can negatively affect students' self-perception and performance, while believable and intuitively sound, needs further documentation for confirmation and reinforcement of what seems to be an obvious phenomenon.

In a study of teacher attitudes toward dialect and dialect speakers conducted by Gladys Heard and me as a part of our joint dissertation, we found that teachers were consistent and insistent in referring to SE as "correct" usage and "good grammar," and to BNE or nonstandard usage as

"incorrect" speech or "poor grammar." As expected, they accorded SE the properties of appropriateness, formality, correctness, desirability, and acceptability, while BNE was declared inappropriate and undesirable for classroom use, but could be used for "peer-group," out-of-school," and "informal situations." In our interviews with the teachers, such comments as "you have got to speak formal langu ge," "they must learn to speak SE," students must "practice correct speech" appeared frequently. Interview responses also revealed that the teachers evidenced some ambiguity in distinguishing between nonstandardness and the black dialect (they equated grammatical deviations as nonstandard or substandard and deviant lexical and styiistic features as black slang or BNE.) For example, when we called attention to a typical SE-BNE grammatical contrast, He sings vs He sing, one teacher explained that she would call the latter "just incorrect grammar."

Although Dr. Heard and I found that all of the students in our case study were functionally bidialectal, their teachers, for the most part, felt that they were lacking in performance capability. For example, one explained, "Generally, I would say that the SE production of my students is not too good," and another exclaimed that the typical student in his class "has got that old Prentice-Hall grammar right in his head. He's got all of the rules, but he can't put it together. I don't think they have actually learned to use it." /ref. to SE/ Yet my colleague and I found a low frequency of the nonstandard forms usually ascribed to black dialect speakers in the students' papers. In her study of black and white students in developmental level courses, Marilyn Sternglass (1974) made the same discovery about the black students.

Despite the fact that the teachers in our study expressed negative attitudes regarding the value, appropriateness, and desirability of BNE, these attitudes were not extended to include the students. We found little

evidence of teacher attitudes which could be construed as hostile toward or rejective of the students. Such hostility and rejection are often noted in the literature regarding linguistically different children, usually in the northern inner-city schools - children whose social class, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and values often differ radically from those of their teachers. Unlike the students in a study by Gordon Morgan of New York inner-city students who were openly hostile and resentful at attempts to modify their language patterns, the students in our sample felt that their teachers were genuinely interested in them and often expressed appreciation for their teachers' efforts to help them "improve" their language.

Studies regarding black students' attitudes toward the standard and their own dialect are extremely scarce and limited to a few brief and scattered references in the literature; therefore, I will rely heavily on our study for insights on this matter.

In schools and colleges, traditional English programs for black dialect speakers, generally labelled as "enrichment," "remedial," or "developmental," are designed to modify the students' language patterns by eradicating the black dialect, the "bad" English and replacing it with SE, the "good" English. Students' reactions to this process are often manifested in what I believe to be attitudes which are ambivalent and conflicting in nature for the most part, attitudes which reflect not only their own self-perceptions, but also their perceptions of their teachers' attitudes toward them, their language, and their ability to perform at a satisfactory level. Robbins Burling (1973) explains the dilemma of many black students who experience these ambivalent feelings about their language:

> Many blacks, however, are still beset with a tangle of conflicting emotions about their language: love of the language of their childhood and of their most intimate family relationships; shame at speaking a dialect that they have been taught to regard as bad; fear that recognizing the unique features of this dialect will provide an excuse for a new round of discrimination; pride in a separate cultural tradition.

These attitudes persist, despite the efforts of generations of English teachers who have persuaded and continue to persuade reluctant black students to conform to SE.

Many black students' resistance to efforts to modify their language derives in part from their teachers' attitudes toward and judgments about them and their language. Generally, black students have been taught from a correctional point of view based upon the rules of prescriptive grammar and have been taught and told too often and too long that their language is "bad," "broken" and that SE is "good," "correct," and "proper." Jane Torrey, (1970) writing in the Harvard Educational Review, observes that black students have entered schools "to find that nearly everything they said was branded as 'wrong'. In order to be right they had to adopt forms that seem alien even when they were able to learn how to use them." (p. 257)

Interview responses of the students in our study revealed the impact of their learning orientations by the characteristic descriptions of "good" and "bad" used whenever they referred to variations in English usage. Variously referring to SE as "good" English, "classroom English," "correct English," "good grammar" and "proper grammar" and to nonstandard deviations as slang or "bad" and "broken" English, they simply reflected their teachers' valuations. One student's response seems to echo the feelings of the others. "You should use correct words and speak properly the way you should" because "it seems like all through school when you first get in kindergarten, you're encouraged not to speak like that (reference to BNE) because they say it's the wrong way".

Implicit in the students' assessment is the acknowledgement that their language is considered nonstandard and that their teachers' allusions to their "bad" and "broken" English signify that something is wrong with it and, by extension, with the students. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1971) makes a similar observation after studying black students in an urban community on the West Coast:

> Blacks feel that their code does not meet the prestige norms. Linguistic insecurity is generated by this belief and in situations where the prestige functions of language is important they monitor and attempt to delete and replace nonstandard variants with standard variants. (p. 56)

Interestingly, the students in our sample equated the lexical aspect i.e., ethnic slang with BNE, while they associated grammatical deviations with "bad" or "poor" English.

Despite teachers' efforts to replace the students' familiar dialect with the standard variety, the students exhibited very positive feelings toward the language of their primary cultural group. This is true even though they attempted to delete or suppress the stigmatizable features from their language and monitor in the direction of SE to conform to teachers' expectations. Because of their apparent acceptance of the belief that SE will facilitate academic, social, and economic success for them, they appear sufficiently motivated to learn and use the standard dialect for situations, the most immediate being the classroom, where their dialect would be highly stigmatized and unacceptable. Aware of the norms of appropriateness in situational contexts, they also realize the limitations that may be imposed upon them if they persist in employing their dialects in SE speaking encounters.

Yet the reluctance to surrender their dialect is ever present. One student wrote that he values SE because "that's how you will get a job, but I don't forget my dialect." Black dialect is a language within itself; therefore, I put a great value on black dialect . . . I put a value on SE merely because it is what we are pushed into speaking daily."

Whatever negative valuations the students ascribed to BNE when considering contexts deemed appropriate for SE were unanimously rejected by the students when they considered the value and functionality of BNE for personal and group identification and communication. Their desire to retain and maintain a personal and group identification with BNE appeared to be the strongest constraint for retention of BNE as a language valuable and functional for their personal and group communicative, expressive, and identity needs.

What, then, is really basic about dialects and teaching? I contend that our attitudes toward dialects and dialect speakers merit primary consideration, followed by an honest appraisal of those attitudes to ascertain, if any, the degree of negativism that we may harbor against our students' language. A sensitivity and understanding of our students' feelings and their perceptions of how we perceive their linguistic abilities seem next in order. It seems to me that we have a moral commitment to respect the integrity of the students' dialect as well as to make available to them whatever language options they may need and want. The 4C's has issued the rallying call through its policy statement. The challenge, therefore, for us as teachers of communication and composition seems obvious. If we really want to help our students adjust to and deal with the linguistic prejudices of the mainstream society in which the majority of them will work and live, then we need to submerge and/or eradicate our own prejudices, to recognize and respect the students' language for what it is, and to use their existing linguistic competence as a foundation upon which to expand and develop those language abilities that will give them the linguistic versatility, facility, and security, they deem necessary for the realization of their personal, academic, and professional goals.

Dr. Louise D. Stokes
Associate Professor of English
Norfolk State College
Norfolk, Virginia 23504

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